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BIG JOHN WALLACE

By

ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

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BIG JOHN WALLACE

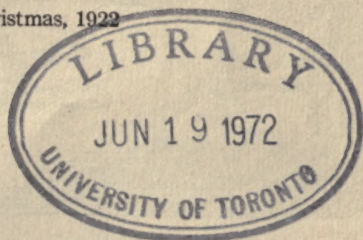
By ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE

AUTHOR OF "LOVE OF THE WILD," "WILL-O-THE
WISP," "A SON OF COURAGE," "OPENWAY," ETC.

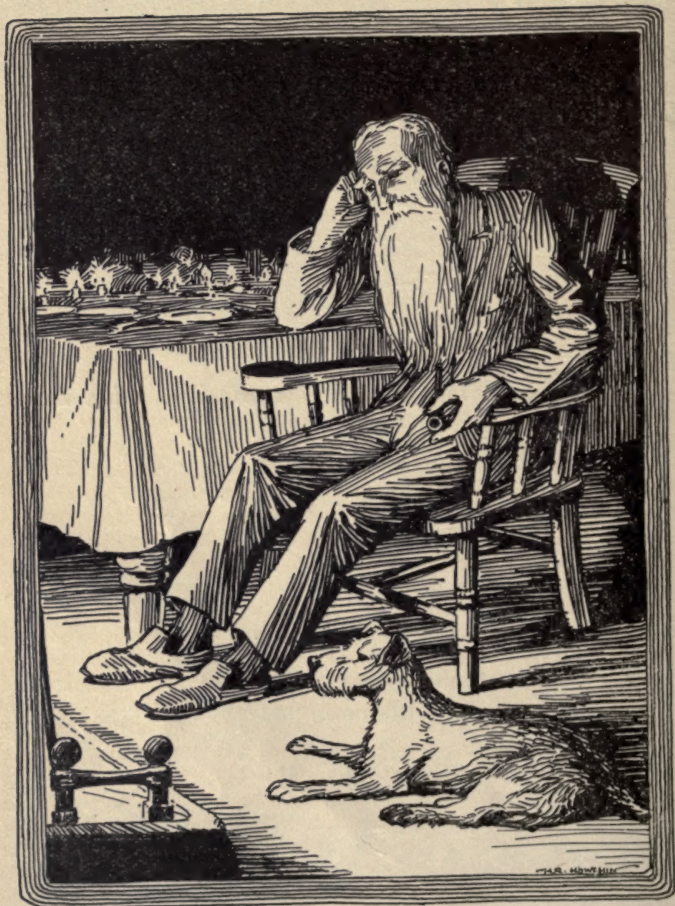
A Romance of the Early Canadian Pioneers

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"To-night I am alone by the fire, and the big room with its empty banqueting table is very still."

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BIG JOHN WALLACE

CHAPTER I.

*"The meadow brook, which seemeth to stand still,
Quickens its current as it nears the mill;
So doth the stream of life, which lingereth
In shallow places, and so dull appears,
Quicken its current—as it nears
The gloomy mills of death."*

I T may be that because I am nearing those rapids which in due time carry us all over the dam of oblivion into the peaceful waters beyond, that certain events which mark my seventy-eight years of life in a country I have seen transformed from a veritable wilderness into the smiling agricultural district it is to-day, stand out clear-limned in my memory. At any rate they are there, fresh as the memories of yesterday; events which mark the war of brawn and muscle against stubborn odds—strong lives shaped by circumstance to fit their rugged environment. Of the struggles of the early pioneers I build my story, and if it be uncouth, be patient with the maker whose calloused hands are better fitted to hold the plow than the pen.

And if at times I obtrude myself into my tale, remember it is difficult for a narrator to speak of things in which he has played even an unimportant part without seeming to speak much of himself. But one cannot fell the tree without felling also the vine which entwines it: and because I am grafted into the lives of the men and women of whom I write, you must bear with plain John Wallace as he unfolds his story.

To-night I am alone in the big room whose oaken rafters, stained sumach-brown by time, throw back the ruddy glow from the stone fire-place. The log is eaten through and the flames slumber. Seated in my old hickory chair, my favorite pipe alight, the half-lights and the stillness remind me of the smoky twilight of those grand yesterdays, when these fair farms about me were forest, and above the misty marshes the fireflies twinkled as those guttering candles—ninety of them—twinkle now adown the shadowed length of this empty banqueting hall.

For you must know to-night was held a birthday feast in my honor; me, John Wallace, seventy-eight years of whose ripe life has been spent under God's open sky the while he followed the grandest vocation the wide world holds—farming.

What a feast it was with its flow of wit and song, and many compliments paid me, which I in no way deserved. I sat at the head of the long table and before my dim eyes and the bright ones turned to me swam a mist like that the hoar frost gives forth in the warmth of the sun; so that the ruddy heads of the McDonalds and the dark heads of the Camerons drew together and held like cloud-rifts bound by sunlight.

Not one of those who honored me but I had held on my knee; and some of them were great, fully-bearded men with greying hair and faces lined with the scars of life's conflict.

It was when the feast was done, and one by one the Camerons and the McDonalds had shaken my hand and stolen away, that she came to me, Sweet Ruth Cameron.

To me she came as I sat before the glowing grate, and stood before me, straight and tall with God's sunlight in her waving hair and the sky's softest tint in her eyes. And old age swept back from me, and I was a youth again, with the soft, wood-scented breeze on my cheek and a mad riot in my heart. For before me was Flora McDonald's face, grave and sweet, with glass-grey eyes looking into mine, Flora McDonald, dead these many years, but whose memory is a shrine at which my heart will kneel until the trail I walk ends in the meadow of forgetfulness—and the bars are down.

Sometimes those we lose are given back to us thus, in form, face and features, as sweet Flora was given back to me in gentle Ruth Cameron, her grand-daughter. Why, God only knows perhaps to keep the worth-while memories of life the greener and more fragrant.

I was but a growing lad of eight or nine, with a calf's awkwardness and a puppy's fondness for play, and a love for the heather steeps and craigs strong as the life that swayed me, when happened that thing which drove Red McDonald from the hills of Scotland into a far alien country, and with him John Wallace, my father, my mother and myself. For the Wallaces had always been the servants of the McDonalds, loyal and true, and proud of the position; and though Red McDonald would have had my father remain in the Highlands he so loved, John Wallace refused to be left behind.

I remember that last night we spent in our native land; the

mare's tails in the sky mauve-lined by the glow from our great fire kindled in the glen, and the droning heart-hunger of the pipes as they sang of the great parting.

Red McDonald and my father were the pipers; tall, deep-chested men they walked the heath side by side, the red of their plaidies lifting from the green like tongues of war-fire through the hill-scairgs; McDonald's tawny hair and beard streaming and his blue eyes agleam with a strange light, my father's raven locks sweeping his shoulders, his swarthy face emotionless, his brooding eyes fixed straight before him.

Even my own boy's heart felt the plaint of the pipes' wild song that night; and next day the shores of our country receded into mist as our little wooden vessel winged bravely outward over the big ocean, carrying us to a new land of adventure and endeavour.

On the tedious many weeks' voyage I shall not dwell, neither will I speak at length of the strange, forested gulf into which our little vessel entered one close of a Summer's day; nor of the long, trying journey through wild and swampy country to the place wherein we were to found our settlement.

I remember well my first sight of the sweeping hardwood forest into which we had come to make a home; and I can see—as though three-quarters of a century's curtain lifted, leaving me a boy again—the soft stain of twilight on sky and leafy canopy, and the faces of Red McDonald and my father—sad with the pangs of homesickness, yet set with purpose—looking across the wilderness they and theirs, with the help of God, were to subdue.

Beside them stood Anne McDonald, daughter, she of one of Scotland's proudest Lairds, pale, beautiful and gentle; while a little apart stood my dear mother, her brown eyes misty with the tears her brave heart strove to fight back.

Beside me, on a grassy knoll, sat Flora McDonald and Robert, her brother, on their faces the awe of a sweep and silence they could not understand; Flora with one slim hand gripping the tawny mane of Laddy, the collie, the other shading eyes which looked beyond the barred skies into an unreadable infinity.

And so we waited there in silence while the shadows lengthened and the mauve tint was swallowed up in the west, and from the marshy wastes came the boom of frogs and the weird cries of water birds. Then, just between the dying whisper of the day-wind and the dewy stir of the night-breeze, came Red McDonalds voice, deep and vibrant, in prayer.

"God, we thank Thee for guiding us safely to this our new home. May we always remember Thy mercy in true humbleness. Give us, God, the strength and patience to do our part well. Amen."

So did we enter into the new life, eight families of us, for others had joined us on the journey from the gulf here, and the days that followed the measuring of the timber-lands into squares, the erecting of the crude log cabins and the shaping gradually of the rough wilderness, were busy days indeed.

CHAPTER II.

*"I will fight with you, Rob o' the Highlands,
And prove I'm the better man.
But in face of a common danger,
Will we both not fight for the Clan?"*

Old Gaelic Song.

THE end of that first summer saw eight log cabins standing in as many tiny clearings scattered at distances of a mile to a mile and a half apart through the hardwoods. Autumn with her hazy gold, vivid colorings on leaf and fern, and harvest of hickory, beech and walnuts on ridges and in sheltered valleys saw no cessation to the labor of cutting the huge trees and the laying bare of the rich loam which in time was to yield the hardy toilers a livelihood. Winter with her gripping frosts and heavy snows could not check the onslaught of man against the impediment to his ambition; and so the endless slaughter of the grand trees went on.

There were no sluggards in our little colony. Each of us did his or her part. All day the axes of the men "tacked" the battle cry, and those of us not yet strong enough to handle an axe, carried and piled in huge heaps the branches lopped from the bleeding tree-trunks. Wherever possible several monarchs would be felled across each other, and in the early Summer when the heat had dried the sap these were burned.

And so the first years in our new home passed, five of them. By now several more families had settled in our community.

The clearings expanded and stumpy fields grew up to be tilled by heavy, clumsy hoe and shovel. Later, crude ploughs built at the smithy shop that had been erected at the curve in the corduroy road, took the place of these unwieldy articles. Oxen were used to haul the plough and snake out timbers. A good span could be purchased for twenty dollars.

Corn and wheat were the staple products in the earlier of these strenuous days, just as they are to-day. The latter was sown broadcast and harvested first with a sickle, later with a scythe bearing a "laying" arm and called by the farmers a cradle. Sometimes the ripened grain was merely headed and the standing straw burned. The grain was threshed with a flail

or by tramping oxen. The grain separator with its primitive treadmill or horse-power was yet unknown.

The land was black and rich, clay loam it was called, and yielded splendid crops. Of potatoes we had an abundance each season, while other vegetables flourished equally well.

In due time each farm clearing was divided off into plots, or fields. Snake or "rail" fences of split ash and walnut were used for this purpose. Many of those fences are still doing duty to-day, and if the splendid trees from which they were taken were standing now, they would be worth a great deal of money.

We never lacked for an abundance of food. Game was plentiful in the woods and easy to secure. Deer were numerous; wild turkeys came in flocks to our fields. Black bears, urged by curiosity and sometimes by mischief, came to our very doors. Sometimes our pig-pens suffered from Bruin's visits. Wolves, lynx, bobcats and other fur-bearing animals were very numerous. Bees of brown quail whistled from the uplands, partridge drummed in the thickets, and wild duck and geese were to be found in great numbers throughout the rushy swales and on the bay, which marked the southern boundary of the forest. Flocks of wild pigeon darkened the sky.

Reviewing those early years, comparing the primitive methods of tilling the soil with those we employ to-day and giving full credit to those staunch-hearted pioneers who shaped the rugged wilderness into the smiling agricultural garden of the present, I ask myself: What of the man who stood behind myself and fellow-fighter, the man whose inventive brain fashioned implements that made the fulfilment of our dream possible? Has he been given the credit justly due him?

As one who has been privileged to journey all the way along the jagged trail of progress in farming, from the sickle and hoe days to this, the day of the kerosene tractor, I would say that to the pioneer farmer and the pioneer manufacturer of farm implements honors are even. Together they have proven a wonderful combination toward the shaping of a great industry.

CHAPTER III.

IT was in the Spring of the eighth year following the founding of our settlement that certain events took place, each of which was to have an influence on my life. I was nineteen years of age at this time, and known throughout the community as Big John Wallace. I stood six feet three inches and weighed—according to stillards at Shoopers' Wharf, at which a schooner, owned and captained by one of that name, touched monthly during the Summer—two hundred and twenty pounds. Needless to say, my great size was a source of constant mortification to me. The lads of my own age joked me about my huge hands and feet, and the girls at the dances looked startled if I requested them to honor me. I think I must have been very good-natured, because neither teasing nor jeers seemed to affect me. I was fond of music and loved dancing, and thanks to my father's training—in Scotland he had held the county championship for running, jumping, wrestling and boxing—I got through it well in spite of my size.

Let me say just here that two years previous to this happening I am about to relate, an English sportsman of independent means and, I understand, of blue blood, had purchased a large section of prime forest from the government, at a point some forty miles east of us, on the shore of the lake. His name was Hallibut. He was of autocratic and overbearing manner, fond of his drink and a true lover of the hunt. With him he had brought a number of dissolute companions, most of them, like himself, scions of noble family.

Colonel Hallibut's house, the first to be built of lumber, he having brought a portable sawmill into the forest with him, was a big, rambling structure, erected to stand the stress and wear of the elements. All about it he had built a wall of oaken timbers, why, I cannot say, unless indeed it was because he feared an attack by the Indians, whose rights he had in a measure usurped in taking from them their best trapping grounds. Within the stockade were huge kennels for dogs, of which he kept a great many, some of them big, ferocious brutes. Too, he owned horses, it was said, of thoroughbred Arabian strain, also guns of newest pattern.

Many stories had come down to us of wild carousals held in the big white house and certain lawless depredations committed

by the men who enjoyed the freedom of the Englishman's home, and of one of the latter it is my wish to speak particularly now.

This man, whom I had never seen, was known as Gypsy Dan. Why he was so called I cannot say, unless it be on account of his eccentricity in dress and a penchant for living in the open; certain it is he had no Zingarioan blood in his veins. This man, we had learned, acted as scout to Hallibut, that is to say, he and a number of wild fellows under him roamed the forest and located the game which Hallibut and his ilk later followed and killed.

On several occasions we had found our crops trampled and destroyed; our fences torn down, and calves, sheep and cattle missing. More, we had lost hams and shoulders from our smoke-houses; but never had we been able to glimpse Gypsy Dan at close range. Needless to say, then, not one of us, hard-working, law-abiding and God-fearing as we were, bore this man any great love. So it was, that when he came unexpectedly and fearlessly among us—as I am about to relate—you can understand why he was given no friendly welcome.

There had been a logging bee at Sandy Jamieson's place, at which the best men and the best oxen in the community had striven in competition. Red McDonald's span of roans, "Buck" and "Bright," had proved their supremacy over "Bill" and "Tom," Neil Cameron's span of blacks, and McDonald was happy as a result. His voice boomed out in laughing jibe at his vanquished neighbour, and from one end of the long supper table to the other, men with sun-blistered faces and brown arms laughed at his witty sallies.

Neil Cameron sat silent, eating heartily, and paying no attention to his neighbour's witticisms. It was a well-known fact amongst us that he and Red McDonald were rivals in clearing, tilling and saving. Both had done well during the eight years they had striven side by side. Cameron's stumpy fields were many; his crops were clean and his harvests, bushel for bushel, as great as Red McDonald's; as was also the amount of money he had put by each year through disposal of his surplus grain and roots. Like McDonald, Cameron was a fair and just man, hospitable as all Scotchmen are, and close-fisted when it came to a deal. They were good friends, too, in spite of the thrift-fence between them, those two with hair now turning grey on the temples and faces more deeply lined than when they caught first glimpse of the forest they were subduing.

"Ho, Neil Cameron"" called little Pat O'Doone, who never worked, but was always invited to bee or raising because he could play the fiddle, and possessed a pretty daughter, who was the best dancer in the community. "Look down your long nose, man, and see if you can't find a smile."

Cameron laughed then. Nobody could withstand the Irishman's droll humor.

"Red Mack's Buck and Bright are too big-boned and strong for your game little yoke of Blacks, Neil," said Sandy Jamieson.

"Bone and muscle don't always count," spoke up a jeering voice, and turning I saw a stranger standing just behind O'Doone; a tall, well-formed fellow with swarthy face and clustering dark hair falling to his shoulders. He wore a jacket of scarlet and in his ears were rings of yellow metal. My first impression of him was not pleasant.

All eyes had turned upon the stranger who stood there, his arms folded across his breast, a half amused smile on his thin lips, returning the surprised looks of the farmers contemptuously.

"Who are you, Man?" asked Red McDonald, rising from the table, "and what do you want here?"

The other was slow to answer. He had turned his head slightly, and now his eyes were fixed on the face of Flora McDonald, who was helping to wait at table, and had just come up with a platter of hot biscuits.

I saw her start, saw her eyes lift to the stranger's; saw the color dye her cheeks before his stare.

Bob McDonald and Jack Cameron, who were one on either side of me at table, half rose from their seats. I, too, stood up. There was a queer, tightening sensation in my muscles, a quivering and pricking of my skin, like a dog whose hackles rise at sight of a wolf. The feeling was new to me.

Red McDonald stood now confronting Gypsy Dan, for he I knew it surely was, from the description which had been given me.

"You're not wanted here," McDonald addressed him sternly, "so begone!"

The man showed his white teeth in a sneer, and placing his fingers in his lips, blew a shrill whistle.

Almost immediately from the trees about the cabin sprang a number of wild-eyed men, dressed as grotesquely as their leader, and ranged themselves beside him.

There were some ten or more of them, all armed with flint-lock muskets and carrying knives in their belts.

A tense silence had fallen. The men at the table stared stupidly up at Red McDonald and the unwelcome strangers, paralyzed, I suppose, at the suddenness and unexpectedness of the thing.

Gypsy Dan was smiling.

"Easy, my good fellow," he addressed Red Mack, "and a little more courtesy, if you please."

McDonald stood, his face set, his hands clenched. Once he made as though to rush in and strike that smiling face, but the men who had ranged themselves beside their leader lifted their muskets, and he held himself in check.

"What do you want here, Gypsy Dan?" he asked again.

The fellow swept his plumed hat from his head and bowed mockingly.

"First, supper, kind sir," he answered. "Then—well, we will see. Perhaps I shall claim a kiss from——" and he motioned toward Flora McDonald, who stood wide-eyed, watching and listening.

I went up to him then, brushing aside my friends who attempted to stay me, and, catching hold of his arm as his hand swept downward toward his knife, I twisted it sharply, so that he cried out in sudden pain. Then lifting him, I hurled him among his fellows, sending them rolling like so many nine-pins.

This was the signal for general action. There was a rush of feet, a hoarse, jumbled cry of angry voices, and the men of the Settlement, seizing handspike, axe or whatever weapon was handy, rushed forward.

But Red McDonald's voice thundered out in command.

"Back, men, back! They are armed and will kill you. See, they are moving off! Let them go, we want no bloodshed here."

True enough, Gypsy Dan and his followers were vanishing among the trees.

Jack Cameron had gone across to Flora McDonald. His hands held hers as though in silent assurance that she would never need for a protector. As for me, I thought with a pain in my heart of how perfectly those two, promised to one another, were mated.

By and by we sat down at table again. But it was a silent meal. Gone was the banter and chatter, gone the laughter from Red McDonald's voice when he turned toward Neil Cameron and spoke.

"Neil Cameron, as Satan entered Eden, so has lawlessness come into our community. My oxen will continue to outhaul yours, if so I can make them, my land yield greater crops, and my money box outweigh your own. But when comes a time of



"What do you want here, Gypsy Dan?" Bowing mockingly, he answered, "First, supper, kind sir, then—well, we will see."

common menace to our peace and lives—as now—how about it, Neil Cameron?"

And Cameron, shaking back his grizzled locks, answered.

"I am a better farmer than you, Red McDonald; a thriftier, too, which I shall continue to prove. But because I am Scotch and, I hope, a man I'll stand shoulder to shoulder with you against a common foe, as we stood shoulder to shoulder at Balaclava, and fought to the urge of the pipes; and God help those who come against us."

CHAPTER IV.

AS I have said before, in that land across the ocean, the Wallaces had always been the servants of the McDonalds; farmers all, with a love for the freshly turned loam and the honey sweetness of swaying grain. And although in this new land my father and Red McDonald were on equal footing—man and man instead of man and master—the habit of service could not be wholly shaken off, and to his dying day, I think, my father shaped his life more or less to McDonald's dictates: which was perhaps well, for Red McDonald was fair and square and a man of rare foresight and ability.

Our farm joined his and it was not unusual for him to give father certain directions when he and I dropped over—as we often did after supper—to the McDonald cabin.

"You had best put corn in the new field, Rodney," he would say, as he blew huge smoke rings from his pipe, or "I notice the ground near the new stumpage is water-soaked, Rodney. It should be hoe-drained at once."

And father would promise to do it.

"What had I better do with the new-weaned pigs?" he would ask. "Pen 'em?"

"No, let 'em loose in the straw. They'll do better so."

Only at rare intervals would these two, friends from boyhood, become reminiscent and converse of the days that were no more.

At such times they spoke in Gaelic, and little of what they said was understood by us younger ones, but a new light was always in their eyes; and by and by Red McDonald would rise and from his bedroom fetch a squat demijohn. And they would drink—God bless them—to the memory of the old days and the prosperity of the new. At still rarer intervals, they would take their bag-pipes and sojourn to the sward floor, beneath the butternut grove, seamed with the white arrows of moonlight, and shoulder to shoulder march to their favorite tune.

Looking back I can understand the homesickness which was in their hearts, understand the strange whiteness that used to steal into the sweet face of Anne McDonald as she listened. But we youngsters were just healthy young animals who felt only

a strange urge, which was ours by inheritance, awake within us to the whining drone of those pipes, and providing it was not school night—when we had to sit before Anne McDonald and recite our lessons—with the music stirring that in our souls which had made our forefathers the terror of the Scottish hills, we were very liable to steal forth and commit some depredation in neighbours' plum tree or melon patch.

I have much to thank that sweet, patient woman, Anne McDonald, for; how gentle she was and how anxiously she watched our progress as we did our best with the reading, arithmetic and other things it was well to know.

When the log school was built at last, and a real school-teacher secured to thunder, reason and whip us into shape, Anne McDonald sent us forth with a smile. And it was then we found that the foundation she had given us upon which to build an education crude but nevertheless thorough, was of the true materials.

I would like to say a word or two about Flora McDonald just here. She was seventeen now, two years younger than myself, tall and straight as an arrow. I do not think a more beautiful girl ever lived. Her face pale and high bred, like her mother's, was softened by large eyes of glass-grey, long-lashed as a fawn's. Her mouth, which seldom smiled, was tender as a dew-filled rose, upon her shapely head was piled masses of hair, wilful and curling as wild honeysuckle tendrils, and as coppery-gold in hue. But apart from these marks of distinction and beauty, her voice alone would have made you love her, liquid soft as a spring of her native hills it was, and when she sang—your soul was carried up a silvery pathway to an infinity of rapture.

CHAPTER V.

THERE were now many open spaces in the forest, ever widening as the work of clearing and burning went on. New families came into our section and built their cabins and set about the task of making land. Roads grew up where narrow Indian trails had been, fortified in low boggy places by huge logs, so that the oxen in teaming might have solid footing. These roads were called corduroys.

A log store stood at the Jades cross-roads; there were three blacksmith shops in the Settlement now, and a public house known as the "Bee Hive" made its appearance at what was known as Walnut Curve, to offer hospitality to man and beast. Beneath a huge, badly-painted bee-hive, these words stood out to catch the eye of the traveller:

"Within our hive we're all alive;
Good whiskey makes us funny;
If you are dry, come in and try
The flavor of our honey."

It was at this inn that I first met a man named Jake Hood, a trapper and hunter, who, having heard of the wealth of pelts to be had for the garnering in our district, had with his family moved up from the Gulf of St. Lawrence and built a cabin on the pine-forested point of land which separated Lake Erie from Round Water Bay.

I had always been fond of hunting, and thinking that I might make a few dollars during the Winter seasons, trapping, and hoping this man Hood might be willing to give me advice in the matter, on learning that he came every Saturday afternoon to the Bee Hive, I accordingly made it my business to go to that place and meet him.

Bob McDonald was to have accompanied me, but at the last minute decided otherwise, so I set off alone through the Spring dusk, my old flint-lock under my arm, and Snarl—a quarter wolf dog, given me by Chief Sturgeon of the Indian tribe who made the Point their home—at my heels.

It was a dark night and raining, and the trail I followed was a lonely one enough to suit even a lover of loneliness, but,

although I was fond of the deep forest and spent every spare moment I could find in probing its mysteries, I had learned the unwisdom of venturing into it at any length at night. Wolves were plentiful and, when in packs, often dangerous. But I had heard that this trapper Hood possessed a new kind of gun called a rifle, which fired a single ball instead of the leaden pellets, known as shot, used in our old flint-locks, and I was anxious to see and handle it. Besides, there were the questions bearing on trap-setting which I desired to ask this man.

It was dark when I arrived at the inn. The yellow candle-light glowed through the oiled deer-skin tacked across the windows, and the smell of savoury venison stew was wafted through the rain-laden air to greet me.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

At a crude table sat a big, black-bearded man dressed in flannel shirt, buckskin coat and trousers of heavy material, which were tucked into boots reaching well above his knees. He was pouring liquor from a black bottle into a tin cup, and paused in his act to throw me a quick, suspicious look.

I suppose my great size must have astounded him, for as he gazed at me, the cup tipped and the liquor splashed to the floor.

"You must be John Wallace," he said, setting bottle and cup down on the table, and I fancied I discerned a cunning look come into his eyes. He stood up, swaying a little, for he was partly drunk.

"And you," I returned, coming forward, "are Jake Hood, the trapper, I came over, hoping to see you to-night."

"And what could John Wallace, whose strength, I am told, equals that of an ox, and whose brain, I have no doubt, does also, want of me?" he asked, swaggering, and winking at Tom Bandy, the inn-keeper, who stood just inside the tap-room.

"Courtesy, for one thing, my friend," I replied, "and answers to a civil question or two bearing on trapping, if you so will."

"Why, if that be all," he answered, after a moment's frowning consideration, and I thought with something of relief in his tones, "I have no objection to answering civil questions, even although," he added, "they come from an over-grown lout of a farmer."

I laughed good-naturedly, and sat down opposite him at table. And it was then I saw for the first time, seated beside the grate with her face to the flames, a young woman dressed in buckskin shirt and jerkin. As I stared, I fear somewhat rudely, she turned and I saw a piquant face lit by starry eyes

of brown; and when she smiled, as she did upon discerning my confusion, I suppose, behind red lips I saw the flash of even, salt-white teeth.

"My daughter Nance," spoke Hood proudly. "Come here, lass."

She arose obediently and, coming over stood at the end of the table.

"Here," cried Hood, rising and pushing her down on his stool, "John Wallace would try his hand at trapping, it seems, and would ask certain information concerning the setting of traps, and where. She will answer your questions, John Wallace," he said, turning to me. "Nance is a more skilful trapper than I am even. My tongue is too thick at present to be forced into doing duty; besides, I desire a word or two with weasel Bandy yonder, whose eyes are red and weak—like his grog."

He lurched across the floor and drew the inn-keeper into a room beyond the bar.

The girl looked at me and now that she was closer, under the yellow glut of the candles I could discern a certain hardness in her eyes and a recklessness in her face. She was attractive, no doubt of that, and I felt a little ill at ease before her direct gaze.

"I have seen you before, John Wallace," she said. "Once when you were hunting on the hardwood ridge that follows the bay, you passed me so close that I could have reached out and touched you. With you was another; a tall youth, much handsomer than you. He carried a wild turkey and whistled a strange tune as he followed you. This was the tune." And puckering her red lips, she warbled, soft as a nest-building blackbird, a bar or two of the old song, "Bonny Dundee."

"That was Bob McDonald," I cried, "and the song you have whistled is the one his father best loves to play on the pipes."

"Bah!" she shivered, "I hate the sound of those screeching bag-pipes. Give me the fiddle, or soft notes of a guitar, John Wallace."

She looked at me quickly, the smile gone from her face.

"Do you know Gypsy Dan?" she asked, her eyes searching my face.

I shook my head. "I have seen him," I answered.

"Aye," she nodded, "and if report is true, you have more than seen him. Is it so, I wonder—as my father says—that all men are fools, and the greater and stronger they are—the greater fools?"

"Why, as to that," I laughed, "I daresay they are."

"Why," she asked, "did you shame Gypsy Dan before his followers? Surely, John Wallace, that was the act of a fool."

"To have allowed him to do what he thought of doing, would have been the act of a coward," I answered.

She leaned back and laughed softly at my words. "Oho," she sneered, "the kisses of Flora McDonald are not for Gypsy Dan, it would seem. Then who will claim them? You?"

I was silent.

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure we were alone; then she placed her hand on my arm.

"John Wallace," she said earnestly, "Gypsy Dan intends to do you harm; beware of him. He is bad, lawless; and he has cut-throats in his band who would not stop at murder."

"How do you know all this?" I asked, for her words gave me some concern.

"No matter how I know," she answered, with a toss of her dark head. "I make it my business to know everything."

"Well," I answered, "be that as it may, I will have to take my chances. Let's forget Gypsy Dan and talk about trapping."

She caught her breath, and the arched brows above her eyes met in a frown. "John Wallace," she spoke, as though to herself, "you are either very brave or very stupid."

"I know I am stupid," I confessed, "and I greatly doubt if I am brave; but I do not believe in crossing my bridges until I come to them. If I am to have trouble with this Gypsy Dan"

Just here there sounded the scuffle of feet and sound of voices outside. The door burst open and into the room trooped a number of men. At their head was Gypsy Dan.

His black eyes swept the dimly illumined space, lighting as they fell on Nance Hood, then on to where I sat watching him. Immediately his thin lips lost their smile and the nares of his nose rose and fell like a pointer dog's on stand.

"Why, John the Ox," he sneered, bowing low, "this is indeed a pleasure."

"One I cannot say I share," I returned, kicking back my stool and standing up.

"Tut, tut!" he cried, removing his hat and shaking it free of water drops, for by now it was raining steadily outside. "Tut, tut, my brave John. Surely it is not in your ox's heart to pluck me up and hurl me into oblivion this night, as you did so cunningly before. Nay, John, if you must exert your strength,

pick up yon cask of ale and set it on the table, so that we may all gather about and drink a toast to Gypsy Dan and his merry men."

A loud laugh from his fellows followed his sally; and as on that night when he had offered insult to Flora McDonald, I felt the strange pricking of the skin and a tightening of the muscles at this man's sneering words.

"As to that, Gypsy Dan," I said, taking a step forward, "I am of a mind to oblige you either way you prefer. It will cost me no more effort to throw you through yonder window than it will to place this barrel on the table. I am willing to serve."

"I very much doubt if you are capable of doing either," he shrugged, "but I am willing to concede, providing you can lift the cask of ale to the table, that—barring accidents—you might hurl me through yonder window."

At this I laid hold of the barrel and, tipping it so as to get one hand beneath its bottom, I lifted it to the table, which groaned and swayed beneath its weight.

"Well done, Big John!" cried Gypsy Dan. "I could have sworn you were not man enough to stir that cask. What ho!" he shouted, pounding the table with his fist, "landlord, where are you? Bring glasses and a spigot. A farm ox would drink to the health of the red deer of the green wood!"

From the inner room crept the inn-keeper, blinking his red-rimmed eyes like a smoke-molested owl. Even to one as stupid as myself, it was apparent that he and Gypsy Dan had met before. I saw a look of understanding pass between them.

Close on Bandy's heels came Jake Hood. His drink-be-fuddled mind seemed to sense only that a band of strangers had entered and that ale was to be served all round; but as Gypsy Dan spoke again, I saw him start and, with a little shiver, draw himself erect. He stood staring at the captain of the motley crew; then, striding across to where his daughter sat at the table, he seized her arm, and picking up his gun, which stood in a corner near the door, led her out into the night.

Two of the men made as though to follow, but Gypsy Dan called them back. There was a dark scowl on his face as he stepped close and, without a word, felled each of them with a blow of his clenched fist.

"Now," he said, sweeping the others of his band with flashing eyes, "let it be understood once more that what I desire done, I will order done."

He swung about and faced me. "John Wallace," he asked quietly, "are you willing to forget the unpleasantness between us? Will you drink with me and my men?"

Now, let me say here, it was never my nature to hold anger or ill-feeling toward any man. I could not bring myself to like this man; I could not trust him; and yet he made me a simple and manly request, and it occurred to me that if I consented to meet him on common ground, as he proposed, he might be less inclined to carry on his depredations against the farmers of our Settlement.

"Will you drink a mug of ale with us, John Wallace?" he asked again.

"Gladly," I answered.

Immediately, with hoarse shouts and laughter the gang gathered about the table. I took the cup which Bandy filled with the amber fluid and lifted it high.

"A toast!" I cried. "Here's to the man who fights bravely, be he gypsy or land-maker."

A cheer went up and we drank.

"Another toast!" cried Gypsy Dan, and the mugs were refilled.

He raised the foaming cup, and a deep silence fell upon the group.

Then in a voice I would never have guessed was his, so gentle and tender were the tones, he said:

"To the sweetest and fairest creature of the hardwoods, Flora McDonald!"

There was the crash of splintering pottery as unconsciously my grip tightened on the mug in my hand. I peered through the smoky light at Gypsy Dan. And I think had I glimpsed a sneer on his face, I would have killed him with my bare hands. But there was no sneer there; only a rapt expression of one who sees a vision. And I hated him at that moment, for in his eyes was the light of a power which ever from the world's beginning has drawn the souls of women out of themselves, and I knew that even my great strength would not be sufficient to hold sweet Flora McDonald from him.

Bandy had placed another cup in my hand. And now I raised it, and like one who faces a steep cliff yet has no other track to follow, I drank, and snatching up my gun and cap, went out into the storm.

CHAPTER VI.

I WAS spared the sin of lying to save the man into whose keeping sweet Flora had given her heart; and it was in this way:

After parting with Flora I had gone directly home, not feeling equal to mixing with the neighbours and fearing lest in my clumsy way I might let fall some word which might incriminate Gypsy Dan.

I was sitting in the darkness of my cabin when Jack Cameron stumbled into the room. I spoke to him, but he gave me no answer. I heard him draw out a stool and sit down. I got up then and lit a candle.

Jack sat by the table, his arms thrown across it, and his face upon them. I placed my hand on his shoulder, and I felt him shudder at my touch.

"Jack," I asked, "what is it?"

He raised his head then, and I shall never forget the stricken look on his white face. "God! John," he shivered, "what am I to do? Tell me, what am I to do?"

I shook him roughly. "Come," I said, "do not speak in riddles. What do you mean?"

He got up from his stool, slowly, and stood looking into space. I lost patience then.

"Jack Cameron," I cried, "tell me, what is wrong with you?"

A hand went gropingly into his pocket. When he withdrew it, he held out an object to my view. It was Neil Cameron's pipe, one which Sturgeon, the Indian Chief, had carved and given him. I recognized it at once.

"I found this beside the burnt stacks, John," he said miserably.

At once my mind flashed to the quarrel between Red McDonald and Neil Cameron, when Cameron had uttered a threat against his neighbour. I took the pipe from Jack's hand.

"Does Red McDonald know?" I questioned.

He nodded miserably. "He was with me when I found the pipe. He went straight to father. I went with him. He accused father, and——" His voice broke. "Father didn't deny it!"

At his words I felt a faintness assail me. In the face of what I now knew, I could not but believe that Cameron had fired the stacks; and yet, the heart within refused to accept the fact.

So there I stood like a big, slow-witted yokel I was, while common-sense and that strange loyalty one Highlander holds for another fought it out between them.

As I turned toward Jack, he gave a long, gasping sigh, almost a sob, and for the second time I experienced that icy clutch at my heart. It angered me.

I grasped him roughly by the shoulders and swung him about. "Stop that sniffing," I cried, "and, for God's sake, try to pull yourself together. What does Red McDonald intend to do?"

"Nothing," he answered, dully; "that is, no more than he has already done."

"And what is that?" I asked.

He made a gesture of hopelessness. Knowing the fiery temper of Red McDonald, I could guess what he had done. He had cursed Neil Cameron and all his kin. Jack Cameron's hope of ever marrying sweet Flora McDonald was as broken as a sapless reed in the gale.

Jack was groping his way toward the door. I placed my hand on his arm, but he jerked himself free and stamped out into the night.

I closed the door, and lighting the fire, prepared my supper. After I had eaten, I blew out the candle and sat in the darkness, trying to ponder it all out.

Snarl, the wolf-dog, lay at my feet. Through the darkness his coal-eyes gleamed up unblinkingly into mine, sensing, as he did, the unrest which had come to me, and with his dog's love accepting the burden as part of his own. And the hours passed and the fire burned to grey ash on the hearth, and as I sat there motionless, reviewing the strange happenings which had crowded themselves into the past day, he did not stir; nor did the watching understanding eye of him leave my face.

* * *

I have always been given to understand that the wits of men of unusual size are not so bright as those of their smaller fellows. Whether or not this be true, I do not know. All I know is that my own wits must have been dull indeed, otherwise, I would have been in a measure prepared for some of the events which occurred during the coldest and fiercest winter that I have ever in my long life experienced.

I had not seen Jack Cameron since that night he had walked out of my cabin, and I missed his bright companionship sorely. From Pat O'Doone, who acted as Settlement news-carrier, I learned that he was living with Trapper Jake Hood, on the Point.

"Poor bye," said Pat, "it's dhrinkin' like a fish he is, and creepin' like a blind mole into the trap av that cunnin' devil. Shure he's under the spell av that witch Nance's smoile. Some day the money Neil Cameron has worked so hard to git 'll be goin' to Jack; and marrak me wurrids, it'll be Hood who'll be spindin' it."

I tried to make light of the Irishman's prophecy; but I must confess his words troubled me. I made up my mind to go and fetch Jack Cameron home. If he didn't come willing, I would drag him, and heaven help Hood if he interfered.

But owing to the arrival of the threshing outfit and the repairing of the shelter sheds for the cattle and sheep, after my grain was safe away in the granary, the fierce winter was upon us before I found myself free to act.

Then came a blizzard which lasted for four days, and when the skies cleared, the snow lay level with my cabin windows.

Fortunately, my stock had not suffered, for acting on old Injun Noaha's advice—he having foretold the coming of the great storm—I had left both cattle and sheep loose in their sheds, with corn fodder and straw aplenty for their needs. Nevertheless, I found the cattle badly in need of water. Neil Cameron, I learned, had lost six head of steers and two milk cows through exposure, and many other of the neighbours had suffered even more.

The weather, following the clearing of the skies, had grown so cold that the hearts of great trees split with the frost, and the ice on the bay cracked like the report of a cannon. However, cold could not daunt me, and as I donned my warmest coat and examined my snow-shoes, the while Snarl eyed me intently, wagging his bushy tail in appreciation, I found myself whistling blithely. I was glad I was going to have action, too much of it for my comfort, perhaps, but I wasn't caring. Jack Cameron was coming home with me.

As I lifted down my musket from its rack, a knock fell on the door.

"Come," I invited.

The door opened and Tom Bandy, the inn-keeper, and a stranger, both wearing fur coats, entered.

"I put my horse in your stable, John," accosted Bandy. "Must be fifteen below zero this morning; the sled shoes fairly freeze to the snow. This here gent with me," he added, "is Mr. Stilwell, a fur-buyer from Montreal. He heard you had some pelts for sale, so I drove him over."

"Well," I replied, "I guess you've had your drive for nothing. I haven't any furs for sale. I had a few, but they were stolen a couple of weeks ago."

"Now, that's too bad," spoke up Stilwell. He unbuttoned his coat and produced his pipe. "Any idea who took 'em?"

I shook my head.

He puffed at his pipe and, having gotten it going to his satisfaction, unbuttoned his inner coat and vest.

"I'm going to show you a skin that is a skin," he declared. "I bought this pelt from trapper Hood the day the blizzard struck this place."

I stood there staring. He was holding a silver-grey fox skin up to view.

"Isn't it a beauty?" he exulted. "Look at those guard-hairs; they'll fairly drop of their own weight."

I took the pelt from him and carried it to the window. In the broader light I examined it. Just behind the ears were two tiny perforations where buckshot had entered. There was no mistaking the fact that I held in my hand the priceless fox skin which had been stolen from me.

"You say you bought this pelt from Hood?" I asked.

He nodded. "Three hundred I paid that rogue for it, my boy," he laughed.

"It's worth a thousand," grumbled Bandy, sourly.

Stilwell winked at me.

"Bandy knows Hood will spend what he got for this pelt at his bar," he chuckled, "and he's sore it isn't more."

He took the skin from my hand and replaced it within his vest.

"Too valuable to leave carelessly about," he explained, "that's why I carry it with me."

I nodded, scarcely hearing. My own thoughts were keeping me occupied. It was clear to me that Hood had stolen my pelts and money. Hood would settle in full with me.

Tom Bandy was standing watching me, a queer smile on his weasel face.

"Heard about your friend Jack Cameron's latest doin's?" he asked, as he pulled on his mittens.

"Well, he's up and married old Hood's wench, Nance," he grinned. "Reckon Neil Cameron'll wish he'd not been so hard on the boy now."

I stood there too stupefied to answer, while he and Stilwell passed out into the crisp, cold day. Jack Cameron married to trapper Hood's Nance! I could not believe it.

* * *

Two hours later I left the frozen bay and entered the pine forest of the Point. Straight up through the spicy gloom I raced until I reached a slashing in which rested a long low cabin of logs.

Smoke ascended from its squat chimney, a grey unwavering line against the cold sky. As I kicked off my snow-shoes and strode to the door, a pair of fierce curs bounded to meet me with neck heckles raised and jaws adrool.

With a kick I sent the larger of the two howling among the underbrush. Snarl had promptly closed with the other. As I reached for the wooden latch, the door opened and trapper Tom Hood stood before me.

I pushed him back into the cabin and followed him. Jack Cameron lay on a bunk, a bottle of whiskey beside him, and Nance stood beside the fireplace stirring something in a pot.

I could see that Jack was half drunk. He raised himself on his elbow as he caught sight of me, then promptly fell back and turned his face away. Nance stood staring insolently. It was Hood who broke the tense silence of the moment.

"Why," he cried, making a poor attempt at friendliness, "it's Big John! Wants to ask some more questions about trappin', I'll wager!"

"Some questions, yes," I returned, "but not about trapping."

"Why then, be seated," cried Hood, ill at ease, as I could see.

"Hood," I said, coming straight to the point, "you stole my furs and fifty dollars of my money. You sold the pelts to Stilwell. Now, I want the money he paid you for them and the fifty you took from my cabin."

He fell back from me, his face working and his lips drawn back from his uneven teeth in the snarl of a baited bulldog.

One hand swept the cluttered table and closed over the handle of a thin carving-knife.

Jack Cameron sat up in his bunk, his blood-shot eyes taking in the situation.

"Here, Tom, none of that!" he cried, and sprang straight out at Hood.

The trapper's arm rose and fell and Jack sank to the floor with a groan.

Before Hood could move again I had him. My arm about his throat; I tightened my clutch, bending him backward across my knee. At the same time I twisted the wrist holding the knife until I heard the bones grate. Then I flung him against the wall, where he hung for a moment before sprawling senseless.

I bent over Jack and raised him. Nance was beside him, sobbing and stroking his white face. Quickly I sought for the wound and was relieved to find it no more than a deep cut in the fleshy part of his shoulder. I lifted him to the bunk and ordered Nance to heat water and bathe the wound. Then I gave my attention to Hood.

He opened his eyes as I bent over him, and if ever I saw fear in a man's face, it was in his. I picked him up and placed him on a chair. He lifted his maimed wrist, and in his eyes was the look of a trapped wild thing. Pain had bleached his tanned skin and beads of sweat glistened on his chin and forehead.

"You devil!" he gritted, "you've broken my arm; damn you to hell, you've broken it."

"Listen, Hood," I said, "it isn't half what I intend doing to you unless you do as I say. I want the money you stole and what was paid you for my pelts."

His head sagged. "Give it him, Nance," he said, weakly.

Nance lifted a skin curtain and drew out a canvas shot sack, which she tossed to me.

"Take what is due you from that," said Hood. "I got \$400.00 for the pelts."

I took this amount, plus fifty dollars, from the sack and threw the sack on the table.

Then I gripped the swollen wrist, which Hood was nursing tenderly. He uttered a sharp cry of agony as by a quick wrench I drew the displaced bones into their sockets.

"You'll be all right soon," I told him. I pointed to Jack, who was now conscious. "What if you had killed him?" I asked.

He shuddered and sank deeper in his chair.

"Hood," I said, "I'm going to have a look in your root-house, and you're coming with me. I've an idea that you're the thief who has been robbing the Settlement smoke-houses."

"It's a lie!" he cried, springing to his feet.

Nance, who was kneeling beside Jack Cameron, sprang up and confronted him. Pointing an accusing finger at him, she

cried: "It's not a lie, Dad, and you know it! And there's another thing he did," she cried, turning to me. "He fired McDonald's grain stacks, hoping to place the blame on Gypsy Dan. He hates Gypsy Dan for driving him out of old Hallibut's trapping-grounds."

"You—you——" commenced Hood, but passion choked his utterance.

"You would have killed my husband," the girl addressed her father. "I have stood a lot from you, Dad, but this was too



"I bent over Jack and raised him. Nance was beside him, sobbing and stroking his white face."

much. Not content with making him the drunkard he is now, and doing your utmost to destroy his manhood and his trust in his friends, you tried to murder him. I am through with you. I have to choose between you, and Dad—I love him best."

Hood's head sagged on his breast. It was a hard blow, this mandate his daughter had delivered.

"Hood," I asked, lifting the chin of the grovelling creature before me with no gentle hand, "is what your daughter says, true?"

He nodded.

"Then," I said, "you're worse than a thief and a would-be murderer; for by your lawless act of firing McDonald's stacks, you have made two life-long friends enemies, and Jack Cameron, there, the wreck you see him now."

I lifted down his coat and cap from a peg. "Put those on, and come with me," I commanded.

"Where?" he gasped.

"To Red McDonald and Neil Cameron," I cried sternly, "so they may hear with their own ears that you have confessed to me."

"I'll not go," he snarled. "They'll put the law on me. I'll be jailed."

"You'll come," I told him, "if I have to drag you!"

Nance laid her hand on my arm. "John," she pleaded, "won't you for Jack's sake and mine, let him go? He will slip away and never come again to this place. I will go with you to Neil Cameron and Red McDonald and tell them all."

Jack Cameron, now conscious and sobered by what had taken place, sat weakly up on the bunk.

"Nance's plan is best, John," he urged. "Hood's flight will be construed as proof of his guilt. Accustomed as he has been to the out-of-doors, imprisonment would surely kill him."

"And he deserves it!" I cried; but in my heart, because I knew the power of the tangled, spicy sweeps, I knew I would never hand this guilty man over to the law.

"Give me another chance," pleaded Hood. "I'll leave at once, and I swear never to return."

"Then listen to me," I cried. "You will have your chance, Hood. But as true as God is above you, if ever you come back to this place, you'll be punished for your crimes, and that I promise you."

I took the money I had extracted from the shot-bag from my pocket and put it in his hand.

He stared at me dumbly and attempted to speak, but I motioned to his coat lying across a chair.

"Go now," I said. "If by to-night you are not far on your way, I would give little for your chance of freedom."

He shook himself then and pulled on his skin coat. Nance came out of the shadows and stood before him.

"Dad," she whispered, "I'm sorry—but you would have killed the man I love."

He drew her to him and held her close. The tears stood in his eyes. I believe the one green spot in his blackened soul was his love for this motherless girl.

Nance went back, sobbing softly, to where Jack Cameron sat. He put his arm about her shoulders.

I spoke to Hood.

"If in that place you now seek, you live a clean life, she will forgive you," I said.

He looked up miserably and shook his head.

"She has lost all faith in me," he groaned, "and it is no wonder."

I turned to Nance. She had heard what I said to her father, and now hovered near like a wild bird that has been fettered and glimpses sunlight and freedom.

"Oh, Dad," she cried eagerly, "what Big John says is true! It is your chance. Take it!"

"I will," he murmured. Then, lifting his head, he said earnestly, "I am going now to make a new start. When I am sure of myself, I'll let you know, Nance."

He strode over to Jack Cameron and held out his hand.

"Jack," he said, "I was crazed with drink and fear. Will you forget it?"

Cameron stood up and gripped the hand of his father-in-law.

Then, without another word, Hood picked up his rifle and went out into the cold, blue day.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT a wonderful thing is true friendship, but a still more wonderful thing, I think, is a friendship that has been broken and welded again.

For years the people of the Settlement spoke of the grand reunion of the Camerons and McDonalds, the feast and the dance which followed the gripping of hands between Red McDonald and Neil Cameron when the true facts concerning the burning of the wheat stacks became known.

I can see them yet, these two gaunt men, seated side by side beside the ruddy fire, the light of true understanding in their seamed faces and the spirit of happiness stirring their hearts to song and mirth, the while the younger folk danced and made merry in the great, brown-raftered room.

Flora McDonald was here and there like a fairy, chatting with this one, laughing with that and dancing with still another. Fiddler O'Doone, at his best, played reel and cotillion with a power sufficient to make the staidest set of toes itch to tap the floor, opening his eyes only at the end of the set to peer about for the squat demijohn from which he derived his inspiration.

Kathie O'Doone and Bob McDonald danced much together that night, and even I, stupid about such things as I was, sensed something more than mere friendship in the manner they held together.

One event of that night stands out very clearly in my memory. It was the dancing of the "Scotch Four" by Anne McDonald, Neil Cameron, Flora McDonald and myself, to the sweet music of the pipes played by Red McDonald. Always to me, who could scarcely play even three bars on the jewsharp without discord, and was never allowed to sing in chorus on account of my bellow drowning the voices of the other singers, music has had the power to draw me back to those things sweetest and most tender in life; and this night, as the pipes called and my soul answered, the big room with its shadow-painted walls faded back—and in its place was the sward of my native hills, soft in the moonlight; the spice of the mountain craigs and forest was in my mouth, and the daring of youth which trusts all things was in my heart, while near me hovered the sweet Flora McDonald of yesterday, grey-eyed and tender as in those days before the realization had come to me that she must leave me.

Never before had I seen her so beautiful. In her face was the rapt look of one who dreams, and while the casual looker-on might think her smile and merry quip was for me alone, I knew better. Dull as I was, I sensed in her that intoxicating spirit of daring and adventure which bids the lured one seek new paths for old; and I knew that soon she would go out from my life and I must face the trail alone. God help me, that time was closer at hand than I thought.

I say we danced the dance of our home hills that night, and when it was done, with a dewy tenderness shining in her eyes, she beckoned to me, and led the way out into the dark, spacious store-room.

"John," she whispered when we were alone, "he was here to-day."

"Yes?" I answered, knowing too well to whom she referred.

"He talked with father, John."

I waited to hear more. It was too dark to see her face, but I knew from the tremor in her voice that tears stood in her eyes.

"Father sent for me after he had gone," she faltered. "He says I must never see Dan again."

I sought her hand and held it close in mine. "And your mother?" I questioned, "what did she say, Flora?"

"Mother would have me do even as she herself did," she answered, "marry the man I love."

"In spite of what your father commands?" I asked.

She was silent, but I felt her form tremble.

"John," she almost choked, "some day you will love, and then you will understand that there can be no obstacle to that you desire."

Great God, if she could have but read my heart!

I could not speak to her. My veins were frozen; my heart and voice numb with the pain her words has so unwittingly brought.

Neil Cameron's voice was heard calling lustily.

"John, Flora, come! Supper is waiting and we are languishing for food."

He came striding into the store-room, laughing happily as a boy.

"There was something more I wished to tell you, John," Flora whispered as we followed Neil into the dining-room.

In my soul I was glad that Neil Cameron had come when he did. I was beginning to be afraid of myself. I was but flesh and blood after all.

I did not see Flora alone again that night. Others claimed her. She fluttered like a butterfly among her guests.

I went home early. Strangely, the realization of the unutterable loss I was about to suffer—aye, was already suffering—struck me this night more forcibly than ever before.

In the darkness of my cabin I sat down with my misery; the dog, Snarl, beside me, his head on my knee.

It was in the chill, drab dawn of a wintery morning when a knock on my cabin door stirred me from a half sleeping stupor. Snarl raised his heavy head and whined. I knew then who stood without, and for a moment, numbed by the chill that had crept into me, I was powerless to rise; then the conflicting emotions that swept hotly through me at the knowledge of sweet Flora's nearness, dispelled the numbness which bound me and, springing up, I threw open the door.

There against the shadow of the forest, like a lily against the sable meshes of night, she stood, tall and beautiful. The light of love and happiness was in her face, and in the clustering ringlets that framed it was dawn's pale sheen and sunset's russet gold.

"John," she faltered, "dear John."

"Flora," I cried, taking her wee, cold hands in mine, "what is wrong? Why are you here and dressed as though for a journey?"

She pointed toward the dim corduroy; and then it was I discerned waiting in the edge of the grove, a man on horseback. Another saddled horse was beside him.

"Flora," I said, drawing her into the room, "you are not running away?"

She nodded, laughing happily; for love, like the warmth of spring, knows only its own fire and power and sees naught of the frozen banks between which it melts its way.

"With him, Flora?" I asked.

"Yes, Big John," she answered softly. "I love him. You would have me happy, wouldn't you, John."

"God knows I would," I answered, "and that is why I fear the consequences of this rash thing you are doing, Flora."

"There is no other way, Big John," she sighed. "You know my father. He would never consent to my marrying Dan. By and by, when he learns to know how he has misjudged him, he will forgive."

I stood there gazing down on her dear face. There was no conflict within me; only a doubt, grim and sharp-taloned, ripped



"There against the shadow of the forest, like a lily against the sable meshes of night, she stood, tall and beautiful."

my soul. I loved Flora McDonald, had loved her always. But never during those wilderness years when our paths ran parallel had I for one moment forgotten that she was of the Clan McDonald and I but the servant of her people. And I had told myself that some day she must go out from me as she was going now.

"Wait you here a moment," I said almost gruffly, and turned to the door.

"John," she whispered agonizingly, "you will not hurt him——?" I shook my head, unable to trust my voice, and striding out, went down to where Gypsy Dan waited in the shadow of the elms. He saw me coming and dismounted. He was standing there slender and graceful when I came up to him.

For a long moment we looked into each other's eyes. Then he spoke. "John," he said earnestly, "I love her. You may set your fears at rest."

"Gypsy Dan," I answered him, "God help you if you harm her in any way, for if you do, I shall seek you out and tear you limb from limb."

At my words a look of surprise and pity came into his handsome face. He reached out a hand and laid it on my arm.

I shook it off angrily.

"John," he said gently, "I didn't know it was like this; you're a real man, by God!"

I turned fiercely upon him. "She must never guess——" I commenced, but his grip on my hand told me he understood.

I took a strong hold on myself and faced him. "Where do you go?" I asked.

"To St. Tobias," he answered. "The circuit minister is there waiting."

"Then," I said, "I go with you."

He stared at me. "Surely you trust me now, John," he said. "I swear——"

"It is not that I do not trust you," I told him, "but it is her great day, and I would be there to see it dawn for her and wish her happiness."

"But Red McDonald will think perhaps that you abetted us," he protested, "I would not have him misjudge you."

"Let him think as he will," I flung back, "I am going with you."

So it was that we three rode away down the dim trail together toward the lifting dawn. The horse I bestrode was a powerful roan which I had recently purchased from a dealer

who was glad to let him go on account of his vicious temper. The slender-legged mounts of Flora and Dan—two from Hallibut's string of thoroughbreds, I knew them to be—minced their way through the silent-sheeted forest, paying not the slightest heed to my stallion's snorted threats and evil rolling of eye. And as I watched those twain who rode before me, young, handsome, each with the poise that is born of blue blood, my heart sunk like lead in my breast and a mist came to my eyes.

But, like one who follows the bier of one long loved and soon forever lost, I followed Flora and Gypsy Dan. It was my hour. She was still mine until the law of God made her another's.

The light of morning grew up and painted the dead forest with glories. Their happy voices came back to me; but I rode with head bowed and chin on my breast.

* * *

At noon I returned to the Settlement. Red McDonald was waiting for me in my cabin. He got up from his chair as I entered, and the look in his face smote me. He had aged greatly during the past few weeks. I had expected a stormy time with him, and was unprepared for what he now did.

"John," he said brokenly, "is this thing that Anne tells me true? Has Flora gone with—with—?"

"It is true," I answered. "They were married this morning by the preacher, Lloyd, at St. Tobias."

He rasied his eyes, and there was a dazed, hurt look in them.

"She disobeyed me, John," he said, and his voice quavered. "Sweet and obedient as she has always been, she disobeyed me in this thing."

"It broke her heart to be obliged to do it," I answered.

"Aye," he nodded, "I can understand that. But, John, the fact stands that she went against the wishes of her father. She is no longer daughter of mine, John."

"Then, Red McDonald," I cried, banging my first on the table so that the cabin shook with the impact, "I am no longer your friend and neighbour!"

"Tut, tut!" he exclaimed, "surely you would not turn against me, Big John?"

"Flora has not turned against you," I told him, "and you know it. She has married the man she loves. Would you have her do otherwise?"

"Her first duty was to me," he said doggedly.

"Supposing," I said, "the girl Anne whom you wooed and won in the Highlands, had told you that her first duty was to

the father who refused you her hand? What about it, Red McDonald?"

His big head drooped. "Then," he said brokenly, "I must have lost a great deal, John."

He was silent for a long time, and I did not interrupt his thoughts.

When he looked up his eyes were misty.

"Big John," he said, "will you go and bring them home?"

"Gladly," I answered.

Just here a voice raised in profanity mingled with the growling of dogs sounded without.

I opened the door. Seated astride a beautiful black horse was a big man whom I guessed at once to be the eccentric Englishman, Colonel Hallibut. Half a dozen lean dogs frisked about his horse's heels, baying and snarling and behaving as dogs will after loosed from confinement.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the rider, catching sight of me. "Young man, will you oblige me by taking your gun and shooting every damned dog in this pack?"

He leaned over and brought his heavy quirt down close beside an angry hound. The dog whined, and leaping up, left a damp caress on the hand that was doubled on the whip.

"Curse me!" exploded the man, "they'll be the death of me yet, those dogs."

"They don't appear to be greatly frightened at you, at any rate, sir," I said, coming forward.

A smile lit up his coarse, red face.

"I'm afraid I spoil the devils," he confessed. "They know I love 'em, and they take advantage of it."

I ran my eye over the dogs. I was glad that Snarl was safely shut in the stable. He would be gazing through a chink in the logs, I knew, voiceless and tense, and eager to resent the coming of these strangers into his realm.

"I'm Hallibut," my visitor informed me, "and from your looks, I take you to be this Big John Wallace I've been hearing about."

I bowed.

"I was told that Red McDonald was here," he went on. "May I have a word or two with that gent?"

"He's inside," I answered.

The Colonel dismounted, puffing and rubbing his stiffened joints; for he was no longer a young man, and high living had given his great frame too much weight.

He went inside and I led his horse to the stable.

When I returned to the cabin, Colonel Hallibut and Red McDonald were seated opposite each other at table. I could see at a glance that McDonald was greatly interested in what our visitor was telling him.

"This chap known to you as Gypsy Dan," Hallibut was saying, "is my nephew. His true name is Dan Whitelaw. He comes from good English stock, and in spite of the fact that I've done my best to spoil him, the young beggar's got a lot of good in him. I'm glad he married your daughter, McDonald. It'll be the making of the boy.

"Now," he ran on, "I'll tell you what we'll do, you and I. I'm Dan's uncle, but I'm more than that. Since he lost his father and mother I've been his foster father. And I'll say this: he's always done what I commanded him to do.

"You'll wonder perhaps why he didn't tell you all I've just told you? Well, the reason is likely this: Dan's got a lot of pride, and the chances are, when he approached you, and asked you for your daughter, you put the gaff in him and froze him up. Nevertheless, the young cub should have enlightened you, and I told him so. But I'm doing it now, and I hope it isn't too late to put a different aspect on things.

"Now, here's what I've got to propose. He's got money of his own, a good education, and he's an A1 judge of timber. He wants to start in business in this section, so I'm going to build him a big sawmill near the mouth of Indian Creek. And I want to say right here, McDonald, with you and Flora and myself believing in him—he's going to make good."

He sat back, his booted legs spread wide, a smile of huge satisfaction on his big face.

I went into the bedroom and brought out the bottle which my father had carried with him from Scotland. Heaven only knows how old the amber liquor it contained was, but, judging from the way that connoisseur Hallibut and Red McDonald smacked their lips after drinking to the health of the newly wedded pair, and again to their prosperity, and once more to their own better acquaintance, and again to myself—I know it was sufficiently potent to bring those two men into closer understanding of each other; and that was a great deal.

In the weeks that followed I was busy with the woodcutting and the building of new racks and outbuildings. My stock of cattle was growing. Twelve new lambs were among my sheep

and others were expected. In March I bought another horse. I did not sell my oxen. Somehow, I couldn't bear to see them go. Father had broken that span of steers, and—of course, I know it was only a fancy—but somehow, when they raised their heavy heads in the morning when I went out to feed them, their soft eyes seemed to watch for him, their ears twitch for the sound of his footstep.

Jack Cameron and Nance were now living in a house close to the Cameron home. Dan Whitelaw and Flora were living with her parents until his own house of lumber could be built near the site of this mill in the spring. Colonel Hallibut often rode over to visit McDonald now; the two had become great friends.

CHAPTER VIII.

I AM going to say but little concerning the peaceful and fruitful years which followed that eventful Winter and Spring. Like the stream which flows its happy course between level meadows a-flower with God's choicest offerings, our lives flowed on their way, sweet with the contentment that comes of honest toil and the satisfying fruits of endeavour.

Swiftly the forest disappeared, and more broad farms grew up until as far as eye could see lay a vast checker-board of waving grain.

The crude log houses and barns vanished, and in their stead appeared more commodious ones of lumber. We were a flourishing community indeed. God had been good, and well we realized it. Great schooners now winged their way across the lake and through the narrows of Round Water to the big grain warehouse at Shoop's Wharf, and went away laden to capacity with our wheat and other grains.

And standing shoulder to shoulder with us throughout these fruitful years were those indefatigable and loyal men of inventive mind, to give us the wonderful labour-saving tools of our craft, without which, I reiterate, the farming industry could never have been what it is to-day.

Like my neighbours, I had gradually extended my holdings of land until I now owned five hundred acres, most of which was tillable. I had as helpers a man named Bob Shaver and his two sons, Frank and George. Mrs. Shaver looked after my home, as well as their own, a pretty frame cottage standing near the creek on the back pasture lands. And so for twenty-five years the Shavers were my loyal helpers—and are to-day.

Of course, time cannot go on without registering its changes. The little cemetery beneath the twin elms, in which my dear mother and father lay, had grown. Neil Cameron and his wife and many others now slept beside my loved ones. Red McDonald and his gentle wife, Anne, were resting on some heathered steep in those old home hills; for, with the coming of age, homesickness had drawn them to the land of their birth.

Sometimes, after a long day's pleasant work in my fields, with the scented wind to cheer and the glory of heaven itself on vari-tinted growing things, as filled with the contentment of

having fulfilled a task and with the weariness that comes of healthy mind and muscles, I returned at twilight up the road to my home, would come the realization that I was nearing the milestone of staid middle-age. I was a trifle slower. I was given to pausing longer to listen to song of twilight bird, also I was more content to sit at dusk beside my door and dream than stray, as had been my custom, down old and dear by-paths.

I say these things brought home to me the fact that youth lay far behind me, although my heart has never grown old.

Then there were my children—I called them my children—those bright-faced, eager youngsters of this new generation—who would come trooping to my door with laughter and merri-ment, and take possession of me and mine. Young men and women grown, almost, and yet to me they were simply little folk who were willing to lend some of their sunshine toward my happiness.

Jack Cameron had grown into a thoughtful and thrifty man, one of the wealthiest farmers of the district was he, excepting only Bob McDonald, who had married Kathie O'Doone and possessed a family of six strapping boys and girls. The old rivalry between the Camerons and McDonalds was as active as in the days of their fathers; but it was a friendly rivalry, and no better friends than they could be found throughout the countryside.

To sweet Flora and Dan Whitelaw had been given a daughter, and through that stretch of years—so like the sluggish current of the meadow stream—little Anne was of endless comfort and cheer to me. I watched her grow from a slender bloom of a thing into a blossom of wonderful beauty, and lived much of my youth again; for she was wonderfully like her mother as I had known her in the olden days. I do not think that had I possessed a daughter of my own, I could have loved her more than I loved little Anne. Then, too, of the youth of the neighbourhood, Malcolm, only child of my friend Jack Cameron, was most like a son to me. What more natural than with the passing of years, I should take to dreaming of the future of each of these young people, and hope that some day they would join hands at the altar and so add another flower to my wreath of fulfilment.

And the years went on. There was in Flora's face now less of the look of girlish carefreeness, but more of maternal tenderness. Yet in her fathomless eyes of grey were still those lights which land nor sea have never known. And I was thankful that she was as much mine as she ever was, and could still feel the

sweet intoxication of her presence. For she and Dan came often to the Elms—for such my home was called—and in the big heart of him I knew lay only pity for me whose secret he had guessed.

The morning that saw Anne Whitelaw and Malcolm Cameron wedded was white with apple blossoms. Little clouds flecked the skies, drifting like homing doves against the unfathomable blue. It was after the happy pair had gone on their way, and I stood bareheaded in the orchard of flowering apple trees, gazing after them, misty-eyed, that Flora came to me, and placing her hands on mine, spoke softly.

"Big John, you love them both?"

"Aye, Flora," I answered, "I love them both."

"John," she whispered, "why have you never married?"

I do not know what she read in the face I turned to hers, but the wide eyes opened wider still and the lily face of her grew whiter. And then she raised these big, calloused hands and pressed her warm lips against them—and was gone.

That was the last I saw of Flora for many days.

Followed a glorious Summer, a fruitful harvest and the garnering of the Fall crops. Autumn hovered with her cloak of haze and magic coloring of leaf and bramble. Then came shorter days with lowering skies and spiteful winds a-down which came the whistle of wild ducks' wings, as the flocks sought the marshes. The sheep huddled in a corner of the pasture; the horses stood with their necks one across the other; the cattle strayed into the barnyard in early afternoon.

The Winter which followed was severe, and it was at the beginning of this Winter that the smallpox plague swept down upon us and took deadly toll of the lives of young and old.

A half-breed named Babette, whose French father had been friend to Jake Hood, who, after leaving our Settlement had lived squarely as a timber-marker in the Quebec forest, and who had lost his life in the waters of the St. Lawrence, had come up from the Three Rivers with papers, left by Hood for his daughter Nance, and had unwittingly carried the terrible scourge into our midst. Two days after his arrival he took ill. The doctor from the nearest village was summoned, but made light of the case. Babette died a day later. Jack Cameron took down with the disease, and before its deadly power was known, case after case had developed throughout the neighbourhood. Death stalked amongst us like a grim spectre. Bob Shaver, my farm helper, went down and died two days later. His wife was

stricken also, but, through the help of skilled doctors brought from a great distance, we managed to save her life. The two sons, now married, took the disease. Frank, the older, never recovered.

Word reached me that Dan Whitelaw, whom the plague had claimed, was dying. I had done my utmost—God knows it was little enough—to lend a helping hand to those who had been laid low by the dread scourge (why I myself never took it I cannot explain), and now I lost no time in going to Dan's home.

Flora met me at the door. Her face was white as the snow that banked the bleak hillside. Her eyes were wide with a new sorrow.

"He is dead, John," she said calmly, and fainted in my arms.

We buried Dan Whitelaw, chiselling a grave through the frozen earth in the plot beneath the bare elms. And that night sweet Flora succumbed to the disease.

The way of God is past all understanding. We bow humbly to His wisdom, knowing that "Whatever is, is best." And still, as I sat beside Flora as slowly she was wafted back to the faint billows of life, I could not but wonder why she had not been allowed to follow him whom she loved into the Valley of the Shadow.

But this was not to be. Flora lived. And when at last she came into the sunlight—it was late spring again, I remember, and the wild birds were a-song—and gave me her two dear wasted hands, I could have wept at the ravages the disease had made on her beauty. Her cheeks were sunken and deeply pitted, and grief had frozen the tranquil pools of her eyes, so that the lights I had seen so often come and go there were shut out from me.

But, God bless her, she was still sweet Flora, and when I lifted her frail form and carried her into the grove of leafing maples, and placed her in the seat prepared for her, I was a-tremble with a glorious happiness.

Summer saw a cessation of the disease, and by early Fall it had been entirely stamped out. Malcolm Cameron and Anne had taken Flora home with them.

Never a day passed but I managed to see her, and strove, in my poor way, to cheer her. At such times she had always a smile for me, although she might sit silent after, her eyes staring into distance and heedless of my presence.

She had little strength; but when she spoke—which was

seldom—in her voice was the same soft cadence of olden, golden days.

Never had I loved her as I loved her now in her pitiful frailty and helplessness.

A year passed, two. Flora was now greatly improved in health and spirits.

It was on a June night, with the scent of fern and water plants astray in the walnut grove beside the bay marshes, and a full moon lifting above the Point of Pines to sheen the bay with golden glory, that she and I stood at the water's edge, drinking in the beauty of the night and listening to the low call of a whip-poor-will, fluting from the bramble shadows to his mate.

"John," she spoke softly at length, "surely there can be no more perfect farming community than this one which we and ours have shaped out of the wilderness we found here."

"I doubt if there is any," I answered.

"Everything is changed, John," she sighed, "except—pointing to the dim forest across the bay, "the Point yonder and the bay and marshes."

I was silent.

Her hand stole into mine with the old familiar trust and affection.

"I was wrong, Big John," she smiled, "for you have not changed."

"No, Flora," I said. "In one respect, at least, I have not changed."

I felt her hand flutter in mine.

"But I have, John," she spoke wistfully. "Look at me, dear. I am a faded, scarred, old woman. Isn't that what you see? Answer me truthfully, John."

I stood gazing into her eyes, and what I saw there was the same sweet charm, the same warmth and tenderness of soul that had held my heart in her keeping for so many years.

And then I did that which I had struggled against doing all my life. I forgot myself, and in the urge of a love I could no longer master, I drew her to me and held her close in my arms.

I do not know how long I held her thus. There was in the love I bore her a tranquility akin to the soft mood of that June night; sweet, passionless, pure, and alive like the soft glow resting on the waters.

When we went back along the path, the frogs were piping and all the world was white with the silvery wash of a high

moon. And my soul was a-song with a great joy, for sweet Flora had given herself into my keeping.

We were married quietly a month later, and I do not think there was one, old or young, in the neighbourhood, but was glad I had found such happiness.

* * *

By rights I suppose my story should end here—as most stories do, with marriage bells and hopes fulfilled and the promise of happiness ever after. And indeed there is little more I have to tell, for although a long span of years bridges that sweet moment when I knew Flora was mine, and mine alone, they have been for the most part uneventful years. But they have been years of fruitful progress for that sturdy, staunch-hearted army to which I have the honour to belong—the Land Makers.

To-day as far as eye can measure distance, throughout this fertile farming community, as monuments to their thrift and endeavour, stand splendid homes, great barns and lofty silos. The old order has changed. The tractor purrs its course across level, well-tilled acres; the grain is garnered by machinery which marks the last thought in efficiency; glimmering rails of steel link up the distances; the telephone and the automobile are ours, our electric light and power have been drawn from the harnessed rivers.

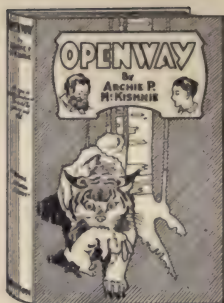
And again I say, not only to the pioneers who faced great odds so heroically, but also to those makers of farm machinery, who so nobly stood behind them, belongs the glory of success attained in the making of these splendid farms from the wilderness.

* * *

To-night I am alone by the fire, and the big room with its empty banqueting table, is very still. On that table are ninety burned-out candles, each representing a year of the life of the narrator of this tale. And I know that it cannot be long before one known as Big John Wallace will, like the meadow brook, pass beyond the Mill, as sweet Flora passed twelve years ago.

But I am content. God has been good, and I am in His hands.

Finis.



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